

NYASALAND ~ POLICE HEADQUARTERS, ZOMBA 1961 – 1962

I left England on my twenty-sixth birthday to begin a new career in Central Africa, once more filled with enthusiasm and expectation of life in a British colony. The Boeing 707 from Heathrow was my first experience of jet travel, and proved to be so much better and smoother than any flight I had experienced previously. We landed in Zurich and Cairo before reaching Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia, where I had to spend a night prior to flying on to Blantyre in a turbo-prop Viscount, a smaller but nonetheless pleasant enough aircraft which flew at a lower altitude than the Boeing, and gave me an excellent opportunity of viewing the African countryside spread out below.



I was met at Chileka Airport by David O'Neill, a newly promoted Assistant Superintendent, whom I was to replace at the Police Headquarters in Zomba as Camp Commandant (a title which sounded more appropriate to a World War II prisoner of war camp than to anything related to the police). Prior to setting off on the forty mile journey to the capital (in those days, Zomba was the capital of Nyasaland) we stopped at Ryalls Hotel in Blantyre for

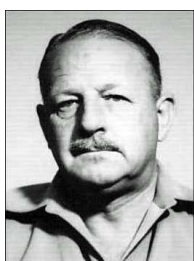
my first curry in Africa (of many in the years to come) a dish popular with the British since the days of the Raj, and which had developed its own very 'colonial' style. The following day, I was issued with my peaked cap (with its Nyasaland Police badge), black Sam Brown belt, and long Khaki socks with black hose-tops. I was then taken to a local Indian tailor to be measured up for my uniforms,

comprising short-sleeved bush shirts and shorts which were worn throughout the year, even though, being in the highlands of the country the weather in winter could be wet and cold, often with a scotch mist descending on us (known locally as a 'chiperoni'). Black shoes were worn by officers during normal working days, but for parades we had to wear boots, with hose tops and black puttees



wound around the ankles, plus a white shirt with black tie, and carry a sword.

We were issued with a personal weapon (a Webley .38 revolver) but throughout my time in the country I never carried this on duty, but kept it in my chest-of-drawers at home. In fact, apart from my time in Special Branch when acting as personal bodyguard to the President and was particularly well armed, all I carried when on duty was the officer's short black-leather bound stick tucked under the left arm.



My new boss was Senior Superintendent Matt Kirkham, who had been my interviewing officer at the Crown Agents when I was recruited. I was in effect his number two in the administration of Police Headquarters, and was responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of officers' housing, the living quarters of married and single African police other ranks, and the offices, buildings and grounds of the large area comprising the headquarters. This

was somewhat disappointing for me, as I had envisaged being given more 'hands on' police work, especially having done well at the Metropolitan Training School. But I was assured that the role would in no way be permanent, and decided to make as good a job of it as possible. My accommodation comprised the sharing of a first floor, two-bedroom flat, and it was there that I met my good friend John Pritchard, a highly intelligent man and excellent bridge player.

One of my daily tasks was to take a platoon of the Police Mobile Force (PMF) to Zomba prison to collect some sixty prisoners, who were employed in grass cutting, road cleaning and general maintenance work at Police Headquarters. This included using about a dozen prisoners in the clearing of bush and maintenance of the fire break which surrounded the barbed wire perimeter, a task which was unending as it took many weeks to complete the circumnavigation of the area, whereupon they would start on another tour of the perimeter. One day, on the way back to the prison, I noticed some prisoners weaving about unsteadily on their feet, with the appearance of being drunk. On arrival at the prison, I had the half dozen or so men affected examined at the prison medical centre, where it was confirmed that they were 'under the influence', but we could not tell from what. Further investigation and questioning however revealed all. Over time, and going back some years, a group of prisoners had used the opportunity of bush clearing to plant marijuana ('ganja') which over the course of each year was tended, harvested, dried and then eventually smoked, all without being observed by the two guards. (A combination of the lack of police manpower, and good behaviour by the prisoners had resulted in some of them finding ample opportunity for their activities, and subsequent 'enjoyment' of their endeavours remaining unobserved for so long!)

Another episode of interest at the prison was being introduced to Henry Chipembere, one of the country's leading African political activists who had been imprisoned during the Emergency period, which had occurred shortly prior to my



arrival in the country. He was accommodated in relative comfort in two cells on 'death row', and would stand to attention when I visited him and was polite and most articulate when spoken to. This experience and my own (to what he later considered 'decent') attitude towards him, was remembered a year or so later, when 'internal self-government' was given to Nyasaland, and Chipembere was appointed a Minister in Prime Minister Banda's cabinet, and I again met up with him. Only on that occasion it was me who

stood to attention while giving him a smart salute! (As will be seen later, Chipembere was one of the leading participants in the first attempt to overthrow Banda, following which he fled the country, never to return.)

Bachelor life in Zomba meant that much of our free time was spent at the Police Officers' Mess or the Zomba Club, the bars of which were popular 'watering-holes', resulting in a number of officers soon finding their bar bills exceeding their limited income! For myself, I found sport (mainly cricket, golf and bridge) and amateur dramatics took up much of my free time, and occupied most weekends and evenings. Zomba Theatre Club was especially active and I soon became involved in plays such as Moliere's 'School for Wives' (when I met another good friend, Derek Mancey, who was employed in the local tobacco industry), but more particularly in comedies like 'Sailor Beware'. Stage Reviews

were also popular in which I was often either compere or filled a comic role.



Other than the bar, I found that the Officers' Mess was limited in its activities and took it upon myself to introduce various evening events and entertainments, including 'What's My line?', quizzes and even a fencing match against officers of the King's African Rifles (KAR). A somewhat amusing episode occurred at the latter, when during one of the 'duels' the small, red plastic tip covering the 'point' of one of the foils flew off, and into the cleavage

of Rena Lodge, the Deputy Commissioner's wife, sitting in the front row of spectators, who calmly looked down her front and calmly announced 'My God, I've now got three!

Saturday mornings comprised 'Commissioner's Parade' when we all turned out in best kit and shiny boots, to be inspected and march around the main square to the beat of the Police Band. The most prominent performers were the Police Mobile Force (PMF) a quasi-military component of the Police Force, comprising platoons of ex-KAR soldiers led by young British Inspectors, whose role was entirely of a military nature rather than the 'prevention and detection of crime'. Following the parade, bachelor officers quickly adjourned to the Mess for beer and a massive curry which took up most of the rest of the day. The PMF officers' rest room was close to my own office and it was always amusing to see the rush to the window by these lonely bachelors, whenever one particular secretary appeared on the veranda of the Commissioner's Office (Barbara Ridpath was a most attractive and buxom young woman, who was affectionately known to all as 'baby doll!'). Matt Kirkham was easy to work for, and as he was nearing retirement spent much of his time smoking his pipe and standing at the doorway staring at the nearby offices of Special Branch Headquarters. But clearly, he never noticed the irony of his oft quoted statement 'I've been watching the Head of Special Branch's office, and neither he nor any of his bloody staff seem to do any work'!